

Touching Images

Audience interaction is today considered an essential feature of museums that aspire to be cutting-edge and attractive.¹ In particular, in recent exhibitions, screens can often be touched and serve as an interface between viewers and contents. Interactive kiosks, which remain to this day an occasionally encumbering presence among the artefacts and artworks, are being replaced by devices that tend to hide their technological component in favour of forms of interaction that aim to be as spontaneous as possible.

The impact of interactive devices on the configuration of contemporary exhibitions is at least two-fold. First, it underscores the tactile dimension of reception, whose influence on museum history has been more pervasive than is usually recognised. The interdiction of touch in the museum context is a relatively recent phenomenon, which intervened progressively after the eighteenth century. In previous centuries, touching the objects was common practice for the visitors of both public and private collections: merely looking at the exhibits was considered superficial, and it was believed that only through physical contact could one fully experience them.² However, the museum perception was later identified tout court with the sense of sight, to the point that, as noted by Susan Stewart, museums are conceived in such a natural way as ‘empires of sight’ that rarely happens to imagine that their fruition can take place through other senses.³ However, considered in relation to the display of moving images, this supremacy of the sight reveals to be less pervasive than one might imagine. From the Mutoscopes of the Imperial War Museum, activated by turning a handle, to the interactive tables we will discuss in this chapter, which function thanks to the touch, moving images in museums often solicit the tactile involvement of the visitors.

Wanda Strauven identifies the origins of the ‘tactile’ tradition in the practice of touching the exhibits of private collections back in the second half of the seventeenth century, before their gradual institutionalisation. According to Strauven, after the practice of touching museum items started being prohibited at the end of the eighteenth century and start of the nineteenth, it found a new expression in optical games and educational devices, where the screen becomes a surface to touch: ‘one could . . . claim that early-nineteenth-

century optical toys ensured, within the private sphere of home entertainment, a continuation of the hands-on practice that for more than a century invaded the semi-private/semi-public sphere of early museums'.⁴ In other words, if according to Strauven the cultural practice of touching spread even to traditionally distant fields, following its many occurrences allows for the weaving of a further connection between museum and the cinema.

Second, contemporary exhibition strategies tend to use the entire extension of still or moving images as touch-sensitive surfaces: the screen is seamlessly integrated in the museum space, and both jointly create a concrete yet elusive field of encounter between the visitor and the contents proposed by the institution. Images can therefore be seen as material surfaces that articulate a contact, a significant and transformative relationship.

TOUCHING, BROWSING: INTERACTIVE TABLES

One of the devices most commonly found in contemporary museums is the so-called 'interactive table', which is a kind of horizontal touch screen. For instance, at the Audiovisual Museum of the Resistance (Museo Audiovisivo della Resistenza) in Fossdinovo (Italy), a large 'memory table' is installed in the middle of the exhibition space. On the black surface, whose exact shape fades into the semi-darkness of the room, the luminous reliefs of books and posters draw the viewer's attention. When touched, the images come to life thanks to archival films and photographs, through which the viewer can browse as if they were the pages of a book.

The book metaphor is often extended to the very organisation of the contents, which can be arranged as if on the pages of a volume whose images come to life under the eyes of the visitor. The reference object can also be a photo album, on which fragments of films and photographs compose a mosaic of places and faces through which the visitor can browse by the simple touch of the hand.

The Audiovisual Museum of the Resistance collects testimonies and documents related to the Second World War in Italy, when a number of people, the partisans, fought against the Fascist regime and its allies. The screens along the walls of the museum space show, in the form of video testimonies, the faces and voices of eighteen partisans who recount their experience of the war. There is a thematic consonance between the documents on display on the interactive table and the corresponding video fragments, so that the memories of the witnesses are directly related to each visitor's individual itinerary through the traces of the past disseminated on the table, 'as if they were asking the question and therefore taking responsibility for the answer'.⁵ One can say that the museum literally stages the process of transmission of

memory, inviting the visitor to a performance that is both physical (through the touch that initiates and mediates the exploration of contents) and imaginative: only the viewer's participation can enable the exchange that constitutes the underlying principle of the museum installation.

In the Widespread Museum of Resistance in Turin, one of the last rooms of the exhibition itinerary presents an interactive table. War, racial discrimination, occupation, the Italian resistance movement, and the liberation are narrated through historical footage, written documents, and original photographs. Recovered from archives and digitised, these documents come back to life on the table only when the visitors activate them by touch: they must touch the interactive table to select the themes and chronological landmarks that interest them.

The interactive tables of contemporary exhibitions use the flexibility of digital archives to present an eclectic ensemble of written documents, footage, and photographs, whose significance is mostly determined by interconnections that are spatially translated into montage effects. Touch activates the table's memory and arranges it into a mosaic of which the film image is only one component, while also constituting the dynamic principle that animates all the others.

Even if moving images are only one of the features of interactive tables (together with photographs, sounds, and written texts), these displays are intrinsically cinematic. For instance, in the installation *World That Was* at the



Figure 10.1 Widespread Museum of Resistance: the interactive table (photo Fabrizio Esposito, courtesy of Museo Diffuso della Resistenza, Turin).

Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust, several old photographs – mostly individual, family, and group portraits – can be observed from three luminous openings corresponding to the three interaction stations on the table. The images appear to be floating on the surface and to be shuffled and reshuffled in front of the viewer's eyes before fading back into darkness.

The visitor can select one of these images with a simple touch, and drag it to the lower edge of the table, where it will reveal the name and story of the subjects. In some cases, the still images turn into short video fragments, whose audio is broadcast through the earphones of the audio-guide. The viewer's simple and immediate gesture reactivates the memory of otherwise silent archives, creating original and personal connections between the documents. At the same time, the slow and constant shuffling of the images recombines the images in a montage that plays with the different depths of field, changes of scale, zooms, and juxtapositions. The result is an exploration of the multiple possible combinations of images not only through the movements on the table's surface, but also through the viewer's intervention. If the interactive table only occasionally shows actual moving images, its dynamic approach to images is based on the intrinsically cinematic principle of montage. The latter is a constitutive element of its significance and creates a deep connection between the archive and the viewer. The movement of the images thus become the factor that 'brings back to life' archival images, also thanks to the active intervention of the visitors who explore the archive documents.

REWRITING SPACE: THE MUSEUM LABORATORY OF THE MIND

Set up by Studio Azzurro in the former psychiatric hospital of Santa Maria della Pietà in Rome, the Museum Laboratory of the Mind (Museo Laboratorio della Mente) addresses issues of mental distress and the de-humanisation of patients that characterised psychiatric institutions until the psychiatrist Franco Basaglia enforced their abolition with the eponymous Basaglia Law (Italian Mental Health Act) in 1978. The Museum Laboratory of the Mind is emblematic of the 'spectral turn' that marked the humanities and social sciences in the past decades, and its aim is to address the concealed, repressed, or forgotten elements of society, as well as the acting power of the revenant.⁶

The entire museum display solicits the active participation of the audience in order to fully understand the message. The itinerary begins with a large video projection where the eyes of patients stare at the visitor. Placed almost at the height of the visitor's face, the patients' eyes follow the visitors as they enter a world where the markers of so-called normality are reversed: the patients become the observer, and the supposedly 'healthy' visitors become the observed.⁷ The exhibition itinerary follows the original layout of the

former psychiatric hospital: the accepted points of reference are overturned since visitors are placed in the uncomfortable position of those who were forced to live in those premises.

In the second installation, at a short distance in front of the visitor, an invisible wall can be perceived through the dull thuds of bodies desperately and violently smashing against it, unable to come through. This inescapable physical presence is contrasted with blurred images bathed in a supernatural blue hue – spectral images from a time and space other than those of the world outside the museum.

The visit path brings the viewer to ‘gradually adopt a subjective position with respect to mental illness’.⁸ The presence of the patients is never fully concrete and tangible but is suggested by glances, voices, and faces that are revealed only through the eyes of someone else (for instance, through the portraits made by a doctor/painter, or through file photos) and through semi-transparent moving images.

The section of the display titled *The Closed Institution* presents, with only a few modifications, the deposit where the inmates’ belongings were kept, the doctor’s office, and the room of seclusion. All the spaces are empty of human figures: the first two can be seen from behind a glass window, while the third is shown through a peephole. Here the patients are suggested by their own



Figure 10.2 Museum Laboratory of the Mind: the invisible wall (courtesy Museo Laboratorio della Mente, ASL Roma 1, Rome).

absence: their figures are not shown but nonetheless visitors can imagine they were formerly there. The display itself becomes a disciplinary device that implies the virtual and spectral presence of inmates whose existence it organises.

From the very entrance, the display revolutionises our temporal and spatial coordinates (through magnified objects or invisible but impassable walls) as well as the relationship between the observer and the observed – and, as a consequence, between interior and exterior (the first section of the museum is aptly titled ‘Enter outside and exit inside’). The visitors thereby realise the impossibility of true understanding, and especially the impossibility of understanding the alterity that separates them from those figures with whom they try to establish a contact throughout the exhibition itinerary.

The exhibit demonstrates how the metaphor of the ghost can be used. The spectral figures that haunt the museum epitomise what has been marginalised on a social – even more than on an individual – level: the mentally disturbed patient, confined in a mental institution, is excluded from society under the pretence of delimiting what is ‘normal’ and acceptable.

The pavilion of the former Psychiatric Hospital contains an actual set of instructions that places the visitor at the heart of a tension between the space and the ‘presences’ that inhabit it. In the middle of the room *Talking*, a microphone invites the visitors to say something, to ‘talk aloud to themselves’,⁹ as the designers write, just as a typical stereotype portrays mentally ill persons. In front of the microphone, a projection shows the framed image of a huge disembodied mouth in all its spectral and even monstrous force, evoking the freakish and menacing figure of mental illness. The projection contradicts the microphone’s invitation: if the visitor tries to speak, the mouth starts moving too, covering the visitor’s words with its own. It therefore becomes impossible to say anything that makes sense while simultaneously listening to the other voice. The moving image of the mouth acts on the visitors, disturbing their rational speech. The never-ending and never-satisfied interpretive effort – the attempt to listen while speaking – puts them in the position of patients by forcing them to repeat the latter’s behaviours and to share their inability to achieve a full understanding.

As visitors proceed through the exhibition, their ‘condition slowly and unwittingly turns into an interpretation of the various stages of madness, of its postures and obsessive behaviours’.¹⁰ After being photographed and registered, just as the patients were upon entering the institution, the visitors proceed towards a table where, by placing their elbows in two hollows and their hands over their ears, they can listen to fragments of stories about people who hear voices in their heads.¹¹

In the next installation, visitors should oscillate their bodies back and forth in front of a board. This movement activates the display of images on the

board surface, showing photographs not only of patients, but also of previous visitors who let themselves be photographed in a previous installation. By physically moving back and forth from the table, the visitor adjusts the focus on the portraits and can listen to extracts from patient stories. Also, considered from the perspective of an external observer, he or she replicates the gestures commonly associated with mentally ill persons.

The former inmates haunt the museum space like ghosts, inviting the visitors to repeat their gestures – the only way to fully understand life in a mental institution. In an almost paradoxical twist, soliciting visitors to engage actively with the exhibition, the patients-ghosts regain the agency of which they had been deprived by the institution.

In the dining room, two interactive tables allow visitors to touch a series of everyday objects used in the psychiatric hospital, activating the projection of short clips where patients and nurses recount how they spent their everyday life when the mental institution was open. Among the testimonies, a nurse emphasises that patients were completely deprived of the possibility to act:

[A]nd what did the patients do? Nothing! Nothing whatsoever! We woke them up at 6 am and sent them naked and barefoot to the surveillance room, because the nurses had to change the beds and clean up everything before the next shift. The patients would spend all day in the surveillance room: they did nothing, they could do nothing because everything was forbidden!¹²

The patients were left in a limbo where time went by indistinctly, one hour identical to the next except for mealtimes and other primary necessities. However, the former inmates who inhabit the spaces of the museum like ghosts regain their capacity of action in the very process of soliciting visitors to repeat their gestures.

Thus, on the one hand, the conceptual metaphor of the spectre becomes an analytical and interpretive tool that enables, to use Federico Boni's words, the 'return of the repressed that had been concealed or made invisible by discursive practices and "regimes of truth"',¹³ while also 'retracing the action of the subject marginalised in the world'¹⁴. On the other hand, by recovering their agency as revenants, the figures of the Museum Laboratory of the Mind also recover their capacity to act by enabling others to evoke and mirror their own gestures. They can finally be understood as subjects – which does not mean, however, that they are integrated back into a supposed 'normality'.

INTERACTIONS/INTERRELATIONS

When, a little over two centuries ago, Art was consigned to the Museum, its banishment was sealed with a prohibition: 'Do not touch!' This was no

doubt a way of hindering any attempts to transgress the visual experience – considered the only legitimate way in which to approach a work – and it was also an injunction destined to invalidate any effort to connect Art and Life by any means other than pure contemplation. The plea ‘Do not touch!’ was (and still is) the consequence of the triumph, in the work of art, of the *image* over the *thing*, the continuation of a consecration of its unreal side. Images, as we know, are different from the rest of the world: *they do not exist*. ‘To touch the work’ is to demote it to the status of an object and, in a very fundamental way, to offend its essence, which belongs to the imagination.¹⁵

This is how Victor Stoichita commentates on the prohibition to touch in museums. According to Stoichita, the fascination for touching the image, perceived as an actually existing entity, runs through Western culture and aesthetics but has long been marginalised due to its transgressive and threatening character. The interdiction ‘do not touch’ that accompanies the works of art in the museum contributes to deaden the menace represented by the sense of touch. What happens when the prohibition is turned on its head, that is: ‘forbidden *not* to touch’?¹⁶ As noted by Studio Azzurro, ‘going into a museum and being able to touch and feel immediately changes the attitude of the visitor toward the museum and consequently her or his relationship with the institution’.¹⁷ Similar dynamics are at play at the Museum Laboratory of the Mind, where the term ‘institution’ can refer to either the museum or the psychiatric hospital, or more generally to any entity that aims to regulate what does not conform to normality. The viewers’ active participation on a physical, emotional, but especially cognitive level, led them to understand the current processes of marginalisation and social exclusion and to rethink one’s daily approach to diversity.¹⁸

The same goes for the section of the Museum called *Bearers of stories – no one is normal from up close* (*Portatori di storie – Da vicino nessuno è normale*), added at a later stage in the nearby scientific library ‘Alberto Cencelli’.¹⁹ In a room dedicated to ancient volumes, an entire wall is covered with a screen on which life-scale figures are projected. They are today patients, their families, psychologists, nurses, and other healthcare workers: a cohesive community that finds in the spaces of the former asylum, where mental health services are now located, a place of aggregation.

The figures on the screen walk back and forth, occasionally pausing to stare at the visitor. A brief touch triggers them to say a few words, while by maintaining the contact and moving in the space the visitors can make the figures follow him or her and move to another screen, which is placed into a smaller room. Here the figures recount their experience. The room is equipped with a seat and is organised in such a way as to enable a more intimate encounter. The various figures tell of their experience with mental

illness, delivering their stories to the listener. The physical proximity becomes a human and ethical proximity: ‘ultimately it is difficult to tell for sure whether we just listened to a patient, a nurse, or a doctor . . . Their human, daily stories are so “close” that they defy any form of labelling.’²⁰ The meditative mood of the second room, however, could not happen without the preliminary touch and contact that take place in the first room. Through that initial gesture, a human and emotional proximity is established between the visitors and the represented figures that last until the end of the itinerary.

In this installation, visitors are asked to play simple gestures as the act of touching. The gesture is not only a component, but also a condition of the communication, and is enabled by a subdued rather than flaunted use of technology, aimed at ‘increasing the sensitivity of the environment’.²¹ This is the idea underlying the so-called ‘natural interfaces’ used by Studio Azzurro in most of its exhibitions: these are ‘interactive systems which react without the use of technological intermediaries (mouse, keyboard etc.), but through traditional methods of communication, using touch, voice, gestures, breathing . . . so as to create a more natural situation which is not frustrated by unfamiliar procedures’.²² This principle is at the basis of the entire cycle ‘Bearers of Stories’, which also includes ‘No One is Normal From Up Close’: launched by Studio Azzurro in 2008 and still in progress, the cycle consists of



Figure 10.3 Museum Laboratory of the Mind: installation *Bearers of Stories* (courtesy Museo Laboratorio della Mente, ASL Roma 1, Rome).

a series of installations destined to exhibitions and art fairs, including *Sensitive City*, presented at the Italian pavilion of the 2010 Expo in Shanghai.²³

The cycle's installations are all based on three fundamental principles: the principle of being rooted in a geographically defined territory, and the identification of the latter as a 'container of the stories' of its inhabitants, a space where they are generated and circulate. The figures of Studio Azzurro are conveyors of *stories*, as if to claim that listening to multiple life experiences is conducive to a shared dimension of mutual exchange and discovery. Building upon the intrinsic connection to a place, the memories of the individual or collective past are intertwined with the narrative of contemporary experiences. Both narratives are conveyed through a device whose articulations of meaning are determined by the interaction with the viewer.

Interaction is the third fundamental principle underlying the functioning of such 'bearers of stories'. In her analysis of *Sensitive City*, Miriam De Rosa argues that the encounter, touch, and contact allow us to interpret the installation and its spatial articulation. De Rosa's observations can be also applied to 'No One is Normal From Up Close':

[T]he environment created by the installation is composed of images that are used and spatially arranged in function of the interaction. They are not only designed for a visitor-viewer, but also require a contact: presence is not sufficient but must lead to the action, however elementary, of moving a hand.²⁴

When they enter the room where the installation is placed, visitors see human figures moving on the screen. The projection is the only source of brightness in a dark space, and immediately catches the eyes and catalyses the attention of the viewers. But the sense of vision offers only a partial installation experience. Visitors are confronted with people who move back and forth in the space without paying too much attention to them. Some are pensive, others are engaged in simple actions, like writing on a notebook. It is only when a visitor decides to touch the screen that they look at him or her and begin to speak. It is only the physical contact that allows the establishment of a relationship.

These dynamics bring attention to the surface of the screen as a place of contact. The screen is not intended as a 'window' through which one must look, but as a surface that must be touched. The screen is not transparent, but draws attention to itself and its materiality. The concepts of surface and screen as elaborated by Giuliana Bruno are particularly fitting to understand how the relationship between the viewer, the images, the screen, and the surrounding space articulates in Studio Azzurro's installation. According to Bruno, the surface should be considered as a privileged place for expression and communication in the era of dematerialisation. The scholar reconsiders

the concept of materiality in relation to the many different screens that surround us and saturate the spaces we inhabit. Materiality is not conceived as ‘a question of materials’, but as ‘the substance of material relations’.²⁵ Through an interdisciplinary approach that ranges from architecture to cinema, from visual arts to fashion and contemporary installation art, Bruno investigates ‘the space of those relations, questioning how they manifest themselves on the surface of different media’.²⁶ She identifies the surface as the actual core of many contemporary artworks and architectures. It is conceived as a place where a process of convergence between canvas, wall, and screen takes place, generating ‘renewed forms of projection’.²⁷ The tangibility of the surface is where the reciprocal contact between us and objects or environments occurs.²⁸

Bruno connects the haptic mode of reception implied by the touching of the surface, the reciprocity of the relationship it establishes between subjects and objects, and the affective reaction it entails. When we touch something, we cannot avoid being touched in return:

When we touch a surface, we experience immersion and inversion fully, and reciprocity is a quality of this touch . . . When we look we are not necessarily being looked at, but when we touch, by the very nature of pressing our hand or any part of our body on a subject or object, we cannot escape the contact. Touch is never unidirectional, a one-way street. It always enables an affective return.²⁹

Since it inevitably implies a reciprocity, touch is to Bruno inextricably related not only to the senses, but also to sentiments. ‘Touching’ is also ‘being touched’. It is exactly what happens in Studio Azzurro’s installation: touch generates the emotional contact of visitors with patients and health operators who talk on the screen. The few words they say introduce listeners to their story, stimulating their curiosity to know more about it. Visitors are invited to go further to establish a relationship with the represented people. A decision that passes primarily through the corporality of the gesture: to listen to the full story of figures on the screen, visitors must not interrupt the physical contact. Moving the hand on the surface, they can move the figures towards the adjacent room, where they narrate their experience with mental health issues. Touch engenders an emotional contact, which in turn generates another action, that of moving in space.

The movement of the visitor implies at the same time the movement of the projected figures. To create a stronger sense of connection, the virtual space on the screen replicates exactly the physical space of the library in which the installation is located: behind the figures’ backs, like behind those of the visitors, there are shelves full of ancient volumes. Therefore, the instal-

lation implies different levels of involvement: with the surface of the screen and with the figure represented, as well as with the space in which the installation is located. Visitors must become aware of their relationship with the space: they should observe it in its entirety to understand how it is organised, and then walk through it without losing the contact with the surface. The installation is a site of multiple relations,³⁰ between the visitors and the people represented on the screen, as well as between both of them and the space in which they are situated.

When the figure passes into the little projection room, the physical contact with the visitor is interrupted, but the emotional closeness remains strong. The snug space fosters the creation of a sense of personal, intimate communication. However, in the room the visitor is not alone, but there is space for a small group of spectators. If in the first room the touch created a relationship between one of the visitors and one of the figures on the screen, in the second room the communication extends to other visitors. Each visitor can listen to the story of the person he or she brought to the projection room as well as the stories of the people brought by other visitors. The one-to-one relationship established through the touch becomes public, shared.

The choice to keep the contact with a figure rather than another, made by the public in the first part of the installation, determines what testimonies will be heard in the adjacent projection room. So, the overall narrative, made by multiple voices, is the result of the intervention of many different visitors. The action made by each of them does not therefore concern them as individuals, but influences the sense that will be transmitted to all the spectators.

After being actively involved through the gesture of touch, visitors should adopt a receptive position, accepting to listen also to the stories suggested by other people. So, they become fully aware of being part of a wider group, aggregated around the theme of mental disease. Interacting with the installation, visitors also connect with one another: in 'No One is Normal From Up Close' interactivity is not an end in itself, but rather the starting point to construct and experiment with meaningful relations.

NOTES

1. On interactivity in museums, see Witcomb, 'Interactivity: Thinking Beyond'.
2. See Classen and Howes, 'The Museum as Sensescape', pp. 201–2. On the tactile dimension in museums, see also Classen, 'Touch in the Museum'.
3. Cf. Stewart, 'Prologue: From the Museum of Touch', p. 28.
4. Strauven, 'Early Cinema's Touch(able) Screens'.
5. Studio Azzurro, 'Museo audiovisivo della Resistenza', p. 56.
6. Boni, 'La svolta spettrale'; Peeren, *The Spectral Metaphor*.
7. Studio Azzurro, *Progettare musei, liberare menti*, p. 22.

8. Ibid. p. 30.
9. UOS Centro Studi e Ricerche ASL Roma and Studio Azzurro (eds), *Museo Laboratorio della Mente*, p. 24 (our translation).
10. Ibid. p. 19 (our translation).
11. Ibid. p. 30.
12. Vincenzo Boatta, cited in Claudia Demichelis, 'I regolamenti, le voci e i vissuti dell'istituzione chiusa', p. 97 (our translation).
13. Boni, 'La svolta spettrale', p. 197 (our translation).
14. Ibid. p. 201 (our translation).
15. Stoichita, *The Pygmalion Effect*, pp. 1–2; emphasis in the original.
16. Studio Azzurro, 'From Museums as Collections to Museums as Narration', p. 31; emphasis in the original.
17. Ibid. p. 31.
18. UOS Centro Studi e Ricerche ASL Roma and Studio Azzurro (eds), *Museo Laboratorio della Mente*, p. 15.
19. UOS Centro Studi e Ricerche ASL Roma and Studio Azzurro, *Museo laboratorio della mente – Portatori di storie*.
20. Studio Azzurro (ed.), *Studio Azzurro. Immagini sensibili*, p. 105 (our translation).
21. Studio Azzurro, 'From Museums as Collections to Museums as Narration', p. 27.
22. Ibid.
23. The cycle includes: *Sensible Map* (Espace d'Art Actua, Casablanca, 2008), *La quarta scala* (Santa Fe, Biennale Internazionale, Lucky Number Seven, 2008), *Fanoi* (Potenza, 2009), *Sensitive City* (Padiglione Italia, Expo, Shanghai, 2010) *Estrella del deserto* (Antofagasta, Cile, 2011), *In principio (e poi)*, Padiglione Santa sede, 55° Esposizione d'Arte Biennale di Venezia, 2013), *Miracolo a Milano* (Palazzo Reale, Milano, 2016).
24. De Rosa, *Cinema e postmedia*, p. 140.
25. Bruno, *Surface*, p. 2.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid. p. 101.
28. Ibid. p. 3.
29. Ibid. p. 19.
30. Studio Azzurro's idea of 'aesthetic of relations' is certainly aware of Nicholas Bourriaud's well-known concept of 'relational aesthetics' (see *Relational Aesthetics*), but also of the criticism it has received by scholars like Claire Bishop (see 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics'). Studio Azzurro refuses Bourriaud's assumption that participation is inherently positive, insisting on the need to consider the *quality* of the relationships established by the work of art (see Balzola and Rosa, *L'arte fuori di sé*).